

## Overheard Over S.E. Asia

By Denise Levertov

“White phosphorus, white phosphorus,  
mechanical snow,  
where are you falling?”

- 5    “I am falling impartially on roads and roofs,  
on bamboo thickets, on people.  
My name recalls rich seas on rainy nights,  
each drop that hits the surface eliciting  
luminous response from a million algae.  
My name is a whisper of sequins. Ha!  
10 Each of them is a disk of fire,  
I am the snow that burns.  
I fall  
wherever men send me to fall—  
but I prefer flesh, so smooth, so dense:  
I decorate it in black, and seek  
15 the bone.”

## Life at War

by Denise Levertov

- The disasters numb within us  
caught in the chest, rolling  
in the brain like pebbles. The feeling  
resembles lumps of raw dough
- 5    weighing down a child’s stomach on baking day.  
Or Rilke said it, ‘My heart. . .  
Could I say of it, it overflows  
with bitterness . . . but no, as though
- its contents were simple balled into  
10 formless lumps, thus  
I do carry it about.’  
The same war
- continues.  
We have breathed the grits of it in, all our lives,  
15 our lungs are pocked with it,  
the mucous membrane of our dreams  
coated with it, the imagination  
filmed over with the gray filth of it:

the knowledge of humankind,

20 delicate Man, whose flesh  
    responds to a caress, whose eyes  
    are flowers that perceive the stars,

    whose music excels the music of birds,  
    whose laughter matches the laughter of dogs,  
25 whose understanding manifest designs  
    fairer than the spider's most intricate web,

    still turns without surprise, with mere regret  
    to the scheduled breaking open of breasts whose milk  
    runs out over the entrails of still-alive babies,  
30 transformation of witnessing eyes to pulp-fragments,  
    implosion of skinned penises into carcass-gulleys.

    We are the humans, men who can make;  
    whose language imagines *mercy*  
    *lovingkindness* we have believed one another  
35 mirrored forms of a God we felt as good—

    who do these acts, who convince ourselves  
    it is necessary; these acts are done  
    to our own flesh; burned human flesh  
    is smelling in Vietnam as I write.

40 Yes, this is the knowledge that jostles for space  
    in our bodies along with all we  
    go on knowing of joy, of love;

    our nerve filaments twitch with its presence  
    day and night,  
45 nothing we say has not the husky phlegm of it in the saying,  
    nothing we do has the quickness, the sureness,  
    the deep intelligence living at peace would have.